This winter has brought us freezing rain, warm temperatures, 40 below and a little snow in between. Winter always brings us frozen sidewalks and lots of snow that can trip us up, but this year is a champ in making walking a challenge.

Falls are the second most common cause of accidental death, right behind car accidents. Each year, $79 billion in medical costs are attributable to falls. In Alaska, falls cost $198 million during 2010. One in three seniors who live independently will suffer a major fall each year. It is estimated that each fall costs nearly $20,000. Falls are a major contributor to both hospitalization costs and to disabilities.

Now that the sun is peeking out again and temperatures are a little more moderate, getting outside is a good way to improve your attitude and get a little exercise. But you don’t want to increase your chances of hurting yourself by falling.

Good footwear is the first step in decreasing the chances of falling. Choose a good pair of winter boots. You should be concerned about both warmth and stability. Look for boots that are well-insulated, waterproof, and have a thick, nonslip sole and wide, low heels. They also should be light enough to walk in easily.

Ice cleats added to your boots can help your stability on snow and ice. Be sure to remove them when coming indoors. They become dangerous on smooth surfaces such as stone or ceramic tile.

The way you walk can also help with your stability on ice and snow. The Canada Safety Council says to walk like a penguin. Walk flat-footed, take small steps and point your feet out slightly to increase stability. Walk slowly, keeping your head up and don’t lean forward. Leave your hands at your side, not in your pockets for better balance. Those of us who have lived in Fairbanks for any length of time call this the
Fairbanks shuffle. It isn’t very graceful, but it is effective in getting you around on frozen ground.

If you are walking outside, choose a bright-colored hat, scarf or jacket. Many of us have dark jackets, in black or navy. Add reflective tape to your jacket so you are easily seen as you are walking. It is available at the fabric store in both sew-on and stick-on varieties. Make sure that those who are driving can see you.

Just because you are inside, doesn’t mean you are immune from falls. It may seem like a simplification, but the first step to keep from falling is to have your eyes checked. If you can’t see, you are more likely to miss a step. In that same vein, make sure that your home is well lit. Good lighting goes a long way to keeping you safe. Keep stairways clean and be sure to always use the handrail. Keep floors dry and clear of debris that can trip you up.

Falls can be expensive, but the fear of falling is just as devastating. The fear of falling leads to loss of confidence, isolation and immobility. Keep active this winter both inside and in the great outdoors. You’ll be healthier and happier if you do.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.